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SUBJECT: BUCHAREST HEADS TOWARD MAYORAL ELECTIONS

1. (SBU) Summary: Bucharest voters vote for a new mayor Sunday, April 3, to fill the slot vacated in December by now President Traian Basescu. The two leading candidates in the field of 17 contenders are Adriean Videanu, a Vice Premier in the center-right government and a Vice President of Basescu's Democratic Party (PD) and the former ruling Social Democratic Party's (PSD) Marian Vanghelie, the populist and reportedly corrupt mayor of a working class Bucharest borough. Each of the principal candidates represents a different "face" of the Romanian political class and appeals to different constituencies: the polished Videanu attracts educated, middle class voters while Vanghelie is an old fashioned ward heeler who appeals to blue collar voters. In the view of most analysts, Videanu enjoys a strong lead, although the crowded field could force a runoff. End Summary.

So Soon. and Why It's Important

2. (SBU) Bucharest residents Sunday, April 3, again head to the polls to choose a citywide mayor for the second time in nine months. The position is the second most visible directly elected job in the nation. In June 2004, popular incumbent Traian Basescu trounced then Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana in the first round of elections, picking up nearly 55 percent of the vote despite a field crowded with other contenders. Basescu resigned from the mayoralty following his surprise victory over PSD PM Adrian Nastase in the December 2004 presidential contest. Since his departure, the mayor's office has been filled by the low profile Deputy Mayor and Democratic Party (PD) politician Razvan Murgeanu.

3. (SBU) With about 1,700,000 voters residing within city limits, the capital city's mayoral election is second only to the nationwide presidential contest in terms of total votes cast. Additionally, the electoral law provides that only two classes of candidates for national or local office are subject to direct election: the nation's president and mayors. All other candidates (city and county councilpersons and MPs) are chosen by a "party list" system. Consequently, political analysts view the Bucharest election as a litmus test for a candidate's potential success in national politics

4. (SBU) PSD leaders told us that they had hoped that ex-FM Geoana's candidacy last spring would be a springboard toward a national leadership role, both within the PSD and as PM under Nastase. In 1996, then Mayor Victor Ciorbea was tapped to serve as PM of the center-right Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR) government. The position also comes with real perks and powers, as Bucharest's mayor presides over a large workforce, has patronage powers, access to a sizeable budget from local tax revenue and the national government and, like Basescu, can use the office as a bully pulpit to weigh in on national political questions.

And the candidates are...

5. (SBU) Of the seventeen candidates who have thrown their hats into the ring, the two leading contenders are the PNL-PD Alliance's candidate, former Vice-Premier and PD Vice-President Adriean Videanu, and the former ruling PSD's candidate, Mayor of Bucharest's "fifth district" (borough), Marian Vanghelie. A poll conducted by the Social Research Bureau, commissioned by the PNL-PD alliance and released March 28 shows Videanu leading voters' preferences with 49 percent and Vanghelie trailing with 28 percent. Other polling tracks with these figures. Most analysts also give the nod to Videanu, noting that Basescu and other key Alliance figures, such as popular Culture Minister Mona Musca, have enthusiastically endorsed him. Additionally, Videanu's polished image and pro-business stance appeals to middle class and educated voters, a significant percentage of the city's population. Despite his lack of experience in local government, he reportedly has a close relationship with Basescu, even bruited at one point last summer as a possible PM pick for a PNL-PD government. A longstanding PD MP, Videanu moved into the national spotlight in December 2004 when he became Vice Premier. Before resigning from that position March 18 to run for mayor, he was a lead GOR

negotiator with the IMF.

16. (SBU) A wealthy businessman, Videanu has not been free from allegations of sharp dealing. His dominant position in Romania's domestic marble industry has led some to accuse him of "insider dealing" with influential politicians to further his business ambitions. He has also been linked to a scandal involving the collapse of a mutual fund in the 1990's. Videanu has categorically denied any wrongdoing and the well-spoken, mild-mannered and debonair politician generally enjoys a favorable popular image. Indeed, many observers note that the button-down Videanu is the antithesis of the rather rumpled, outspoken, even impetuous, Basescu.

17. (SBU) Marian Vanghelie evokes images of a Southside Chicago ward heeler, circa 1925. Outspoken to the point of brash, loudly dressed, but ever conscious of Tip O'Neil's axiom that "all politics is local," Vanghelie enjoys widespread popularity in his working class neighborhood, the densely populated Sector 5. In stark contrast to the leafy suburbs and upscale apartment buildings of Sectors 1 and 2, Sector 5 has a unique profile: most of the buildings are run down, multi-story apartment blocs; many of its residents work in factories or low paying service jobs; unemployment is higher than in any other borough; and, it has the highest Roma population of any borough. In June 2004, Vanghelie, running as an independent after his suspension from the PSD on corruption charges, crushed his challengers, easily winning a second mandate in the first round of voting. In Sector 5, his populist, hands-on style wins him kudos from the people who count - the voters: he has spearheaded renovation of schools and apartment blocs, established parks, and has an efficient local machine. As one Sector 5 resident observed to Poloff, Vanghelie's son attends a local public school rather than the elite private academies where most wealthy Romanians (including Videanu) send their school age children.

18. (SBU) Beyond the borders of Sector 5, however, Vanghelie is viewed with suspicion and disdain by many, in large part because of allegations that he is corrupt, but also because of his "unpolished" style. In a recent conversation with Poloff, one member of a civil society organization compared him to flamboyant soccer magnate and erstwhile presidential candidate Gigi Becali, noting that "he doesn't even speak proper Romanian."

19. (SBU) Some national PSD officials cried "foul" at Vanghelie's selection as the party's candidate, observing that he reinforces the widespread image that the PSD countenances, even encourages, corruption within its ranks. Some within the party reportedly favored his outright expulsion rather than transparent and temporary "suspension" in 2004. Nonetheless, Vanghelie's success in the 2004 elections - about the only bright news in Bucharest for the PSD in that contest - coupled with his willingness to spend his own money on the election campaign (which most view as a long shot) made him a shoe-in as the PSD mayoral candidate.

The "Also-Rans"

10. (SBU) The other 15 candidates are mostly newcomers to the political scene. One exception is long shot contender and ex-PSD local councilor Cristian Popescu, who decided initially to run as an independent, but subsequently received the endorsement of the National Trade Union Bloc (PBND). Nicknamed "Piedone" after a rambunctious character from Italian cinema, dark horse Popescu paints himself as an advocate of the poor and a tough crime fighter. According to the Social Research Bureau poll, Popescu stands at about 14 percent in the polls.

11. (SBU) The candidate of the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Popular Party (PPRM) is new MP Anca Petrescu, best known as the architect of the "House of People," the massive building constructed under communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu that now hosts the Parliament. The PNL-PD-allied Humanist Party (PUR) has endorsed Radu Opaina, the founder and leader of an NGO defending the rights of urban apartment dwellers. Other candidates include independent candidate and journalist Ralu Filip and engineers, writers and teachers representing tiny parties.

12. (SBU) Comment. Despite the high stakes, the 2005 mayoral campaign in Bucharest has been low key, especially compared to the hard-hitting contest in June 2004 between then FM Geoana and incumbent mayor Basescu. Observers and pundits explain the apathy on the part of both professional politicians and ordinary citizens as a symptom of electoral "fatigue" following the intense electoral battles of 2004. Party coffers are empty and citizens are tired of electoral brochures, blackboards and political talk shows. The public agenda is also dominated by substantive issues, such as the fight against corruption, tax and health system reform. The kidnapping of three Romanian journalists has also kept the

mayoral race off the front pages. Finally, despite Vanghelie's best efforts, most voters view Videanu's victory as a foregone conclusion. Analysts predict a low turnout, less than 30%, which might, however, place the two main candidates close enough to make the second round set for April 10 somewhat more exciting. End comment.

13. (U) Amembassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams are available on the Bucharest SIPRNET Website:  
[www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/bucharest](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/bucharest) .

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